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# Multi-generational community planning: Linking the needs of children and older adults

by Mildred Warner, George Homsy, and Esther Greenhouse  
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*April 2010*

America is undergoing a critical demographic transition: the population is aging. By 2040, the proportion of people over the age of 65 will top 20 percent. At the same time, people under the age of 18 will make up almost 23 percent of the population. The oldest and the youngest citizens will make up almost half of U.S. residents.

The generations are turning out to be different in numerous ways. Not only age sets them apart; the difference is also ethnicity. The earlier generations are predominantly white, while the younger ones are not – most are born in the United States, but they represent a wide variety of cultures. Asians and Hispanics are the two fastest growing ethnic groups and young families of all ethnicities are crucial to America's future (Myers 2007).

The generations are linked economically. Younger workers of all backgrounds are needed to fill looming economic gaps and prevent a series of crises



demographers expect over the next two decades. As baby boomers continue to reach retirement age, the number of younger workers available to pay the taxes that support entitlements, such as Social Security and Medicare, will decline (Myers 2007). Natural births in the United States

## Commentary by Dr. Rodney Harrell, AARP Public Policy Institute

Livable communities have physical and social features that benefit people of all ages, including older persons, children and families. When a wide range of needs is addressed, families and individuals have the option to stay and thrive in their communities as they age.

AARP defines a livable community as one that is safe and provides affordable, appropriate housing, adequate transportation, and supportive community features and services. Older persons, as well as children and parents, benefit from compact development that shortens distances to key amenities and complete streets that support a variety of transportation options.

It is important to recognize that general policies have benefits across different age groups. For example, the 2002 APA Policy Guide on Smart Growth, supports "compact, transit accessible, pedestrian-oriented, mixed use development patterns" along with transportation choice and human-scale mixed use centers. These smart growth strategies benefit older persons with limited mobility as well as children, teens and families. In addition, many programs and policies targeted at older persons or children have multi-generational benefits. For example, the support of universal design and visitability standards in the 2006 APA Policy Guide on Housing is good for older persons and those with physical disabilities and makes it easier for parents to care for children.

Communities that are built to address the needs of older persons and families are communities that can serve all residents well. But planners must make the connections between young and old before they can start to plan for them. This issue brief begins the important discussion of how planners can create family-friendly communities that benefit all ages.

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are far below replacement rate. Without an influx of new workers and their families from other nations, the benefits promised to older adults may have to be cut or taxes rise.

This slowing growth rate in the American workforce will become a drag on the nation's economic growth. Growth requires more workers or squeezing more efficiency out of existing workers. With fewer workers in the future, growth in the nation's gross domestic product is expected to slow (Myers 2008).

Workforce changes will be particularly prominent in the care sector, especially nurses and aides for child care, home health care, and hospitals. Demand for care workers will escalate as the demand for care increases due to aging baby boomers. Across all occupations, the decade of the 2020s will see shortages as baby boomer retirements peak.

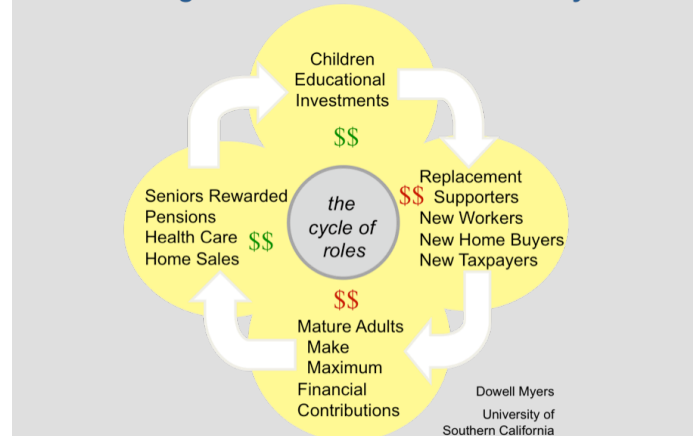
However, many of our young families and children, especially immigrants, are not receiving the training necessary to fill these jobs. Failure to invest in the education of the next generation creates an economic divide between the young and the old and creates challenges for our cities. This is why leading business and economic development groups are calling for increased investment in young children (CED 2006).

These changes directly affect planners. For example, as baby boomers seek to downsize, there will be a flood of homes on the market. Not only will there be a fewer young families looking to buy homes, but many of those will not have the income to support mortgages on large suburban homes (Myers 2008).

This analysis shows that communities need to focus planning efforts on the design and provision of services for young families and children as well as older adults. No generation can be left out. The recruitment of young families, including immigrants, is necessary for long-term community sustainability as well as for the fiscal health of the nation. It requires cross-generational collaboration, comprehensive thinking by planners, and openness to immigrants on the part of citizens.

Currently most local efforts to appeal to the younger generation focus on the needs of young professionals – Richard Florida's (2002) famous "creative class" – and often do not take into account the needs of families with young children. Yet all generations are linked by the need for safe, walkable communities and adequate public transit as well as access to good schools, healthy

## The Intergenerational Social Contract Investing in Future Workers & Home Buyers



food, quality child care, and senior services. Downtown vibrancy, historic character, and urban amenities attract single professionals and empty nesters, but attention should also be given to the components of city living which attract young, economically active families – play space, family-sized housing, nearby child care, etc. Indeed Richard Florida's most recent book argues that families contribute to city prosperity and cities need to plan so that they are attractive to families as well (Florida 2008).

According to a 2008 survey by Cornell University and the American Planning Association, nine out of ten planners understand that communities populated by people of every age bracket are more vibrant, and about two-thirds recognize the connection between the needs of older adults and those of families with young children. The problem, the survey found, is translating this understanding of multi-generational communities into action on the ground (Israel and Warner 2008).

Multi-generational planning runs into three challenges. First, many public officials see children and younger immigrants as financial burdens to a community, especially in terms of schools. Second, parents with young children put in long hours at home and work making them less likely to be politically active than older adults. Third, the public remains sharply divided over immigration with only 42 percent recognizing how immigrants strengthen U.S. society (Pew Research Center 2006).

Planners must begin to create programs and policies to foster family-friendly communities for all generations and ethnicities. Weathering the demographic changes ahead requires people to think deliberately about working multi-generationally when developing



plans and policies. This brief elaborates on three key points to move in that direction.

First, the demographic transition creates new opportunities for coalitions and collaboration across generations. Second, civic participation will enhance political support and promote community building. Third, planning plays a central role in creating systems that serve residents of all generations. Housing, zoning, transportation, and service provision are critical to building a sustainable multi-generational community.

**Key Point #1 Demographic change creates the opportunities to build new coalitions.**

Older people and young families share many important priorities and issues within a community – physically, socially, and culturally. For example, a safe, well-maintained sidewalk benefits older adults desiring exercise or who no longer drive. At the same time it helps a young mother pushing a stroller or a child learning to ride a bicycle. Strong schools are needed to train the young to be the workforce that will keep the economy moving forward. And quality child care ensures success in school.

One problem within communities is that different population groups do not always recognize their reliance on one another. A Cornell University / APA survey of planners found that the biggest barrier to creation of a family-friendly community is NIMBYism (Israel and Warner 2008). With each age segment defending its perceived narrow position, there are many missed opportunities and wasted resources.

Older citizens, with their increased level of involvement in community affairs and politics, are particularly well positioned to build connections and support younger families upon which they ultimately rely.

Unfortunately, most programs for older adults have been built on the notion of age segregation – in services, in housing, and even in transportation. Yet recent research by AARP has shown that most aging Americans do not want to live in communities separate from younger people. A 2000 survey of adults over 55 found that 89 percent would like to stay in their current residence as long as possible (Bayer and Harper 2000).

Just as importantly, demographic analysis shows that more households will host three generations of a family. In 2000, the U.S. Census found 5.8 million grandparents living in the same home as their grandchildren with 2.4 million of those older adults acting as the heads of the households. Most of those older adults were responsible for their grandchildren for five years or more. The trend is particularly strong among Latino households, which make up an increasing part of the population (Simmons and Dye 2003).

Aging in place requires programs that break down age-segregated barriers. Huntington Beach, California developed a comprehensive plan to transform a 23-acre site originally intended for single-family homes into a multi-generational neighborhood with affordable homes to fit different lifestyles and stages. The Gen M 2345 team, which stands for the multiple (2,3,4 or 5) generations that might live together, designed a neighborhood with a mix of town homes and carriage houses which could accommodate home based businesses and young families, downsizing baby boomers, their aging parents, and their boomerang adult children. The program won the Gold Nugget Award for architectural design excellence in 2009 ([www.martin-associates.net](http://www.martin-associates.net)).

A similar effort is occurring on a former Air Force base in central Illinois, where older adults live in close community with families of at-risk foster children. These older adults build close relationships with the young families. That support allows the older adults to age in place and helps the families with broader community support for the children. The creators of Hope Meadows are working with 12 sites around the country to duplicate their success (Eheart et al. 2009).

Another example of a multi-generational strategy is found in Denver where young professionals want to age in place as they have children. Kiddo, Kids in Downtown Denver Organized, is a group to improve livability for families in downtown. Their goals include: creating intergenerational programs as well as advocating for more



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play areas and services for children downtown. They develop education programs for home owners associations, neighborhoods, and civic leaders to unite generations over a common development agenda.

Planners need to craft a common vision that recognizes the interdependence of the generations. Planners could use public meetings as well as comprehensive and neighborhood plans to emphasize the connections and help older adults understand that their political power can shape communities to be more supportive of children and young parents. Such changes, in turn, will help older adults build a quality and comfortable community in which they can age in place.

**Key Point #2 Civic participation and engagement are key.**

Planners know the importance of citizen involvement to a healthy community – especially when the community receives input from different generations. Long-time residents have the history of place that can help ground a particular planning project. At the same time, newcomers can provide fresh perspectives.

Children have their own kind of wisdom, and studies have shown, a work ethic to back it up. Youth involved in planning projects take active roles in gathering data, surveying neighborhoods and relaying their findings. And they seek to tackle a broad range of community challenges, not just those focused on young people (Frank 2006). However, it is important to bring the generations together and not just meet with older adults at the senior center and kids in the school.

Remaining active civically helps older adults live longer, healthier, and happier lives. Research shows a positive association between engaging in civic activities and better health in later life (Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, and Rozario 2007). Participation provides the opportunity to give back to the community. The younger end of the spectrum benefits as well. A public planning process fosters local knowledge and environmental responsibility in children and promotes personal development and citizenship (Frank 2006).

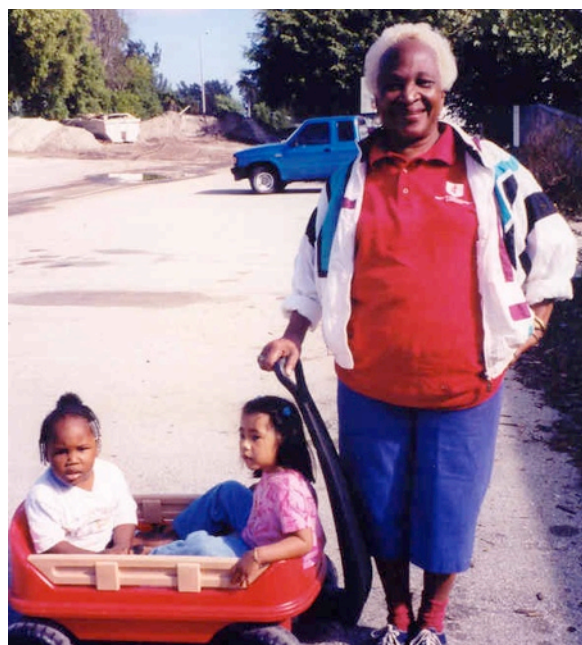
A “Futures Festival” workshop format can increase public participation. The process engages youths and older adults together through murals, models, photographs, theatrical displays and other communications media. The strategy brought young and old together in Kaneohe, Hawaii to work out conflicting

visions for a local park. By the session’s end, the participants modeled a “park for all ages” that included areas for skateboarding, shuffleboard and picnics as well as a Braille trail (Kaplan 2001).

As part of the 2020 Community Plan on Aging in the Charlottesville, Virginia area, planners decided to intentionally be age inclusive. High school students were recruited as members of the planning committee. They acted as ambassadors to other young people through focus groups and student surveys. In the end, the high schoolers wrote a chapter of the plan titled “Strengthening Intergenerational Connections” with recommendations that included: recruiting students as healthcare workers; encouraging alternative transportation options; promoting intergenerational volunteering to bring together older adults and youth in meaningful service; and educating youth on the need for lifelong financial planning. One outcome of this intergenerational planning was a program that recruited more than 20 older adults to volunteer in seven elementary schools to tutor reading, math and languages as well as provide library and landscaping assistance.

**Key Point #3 Community planning must include comprehensive services and designs for all ages.**

Older citizens and families with young children share many common interests and concerns. The key community components that older adults need to successfully age in place are the same as those needed by



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families with young children. These include affordable housing, adequate transportation options, and safe, walkable neighborhoods with a complete range of services (child care, senior centers, parks, food stores, health care, etc.) nearby. It also means an opportunity for civic engagement (Lynott et al. 2009). In short, if we begin to redesign our cities to meet the needs of the aging baby boomers who do not wish to be shuffled off to enclaves for only older adults, then we will at the same time build communities that attend better to the needs of families with young children.

#### *A multigenerational design*

Exercise is a good place to start. Half of adults over 50 do not get recommended levels of physical activity. For those over 65, two-thirds do not get the exercise they need. As a result, nearly eight out of ten men and seven out of ten women over 60 are overweight with about one-third considered obese (Flegal et al. 2010). Since the late 1970s, the rate of obesity has more than doubled for children aged two to five to 10.4 percent. For those aged six to 11, the rate of obesity tripled to 19.6 percent and for teenagers obesity jumped from five percent to over 18 percent (Centers for Disease Control 2010).

To combat the problem, AARP implemented two pilot programs in Richmond, Virginia and Madison, Wisconsin to increase activity by improving the physical environment in places where both students and older adults walk. The programs also conducted a social marketing campaign that raised awareness of the environmental barriers to walking and biking; conducted audits of 150 city blocks in Richmond and 30 residential streets in Madison; and crafted a plan of changes to policies and environments in each city.

The organizers intentionally targeted programs and places that would help both older adults and school kids. In Richmond an intergenerational “Walk to School” event promoted the idea of getting relatives over 50 to walk children to school. The school district changed its policy to allow students to document their walking routes to school for future organized events. Many sidewalks, crosswalks and intersections were repaired around town, especially near the schools and senior housing (Emery, Crump, and Hawkins 2007).

Physical barriers to mobility also exist inside many homes. Universal design standards improve the

livability of homes for older adults, families with young children, and people with limited mobility. Designs are based on a series of principles including equity, flexibility, simplicity, easy perception of information, and tolerance for error. Strategies include wide interior doorways and hallways, entranceways without stairs, clear lines of sight, well-marked HVAC and other home controls, and lower kitchen work area heights so a person in a wheelchair or a child can help prepare meals. The goal is to make homes easier for people to live in at little or no extra cost.

The zoning in many communities does not allow accessory apartments in many neighborhoods. Such small, self-contained units offer the ability to keep both ends of the extended family together. Grandparents or returning children can have their private spaces, but be available to help with child care or care for older adults.

Many communities fear that allowing such accessory units would overwhelm single-family neighborhoods, but that may not be the case. Seattle saw only 101 accessory unit additions throughout the entire city over a 3½-year span after a zoning change allowed people of any age to add apartments. (It is believed that many of those units existed earlier, but were legalized.) Many of the homeowners who added the apartments were middle-aged, yet their tenants tended to be from the older and younger generations – broadening the age diversity in a community. In one study, 35 percent of respondents reported exchanging some kind of assistance between the main and accessory households. When older adults lived in the accessory apartment, the amount of help that flowed between the households increased dramatically (Chapman and Howe 2001).

#### *Providing comprehensive services*

Sometimes the opportunity for a multigenerational program takes care of related community problems. In Scottsdale, Arizona, code enforcement officers, who spotted yard or building violations on the homes of older adults, referred the cases to Scottsdale Teens on a Mission for Progress, which coordinated teen volunteers to help with yard work and minor home repairs. The program paid the young workers \$8.50 an hour and trained them with basic yard maintenance and job skills. Overall, 183 older homeowners or homeowners with limited mobility had their code violations fixed, retained their living independence, and built a positive relationship with

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teenagers. Through the program, the city also connected older adults with other needed services. From 2005 to 2009, the community benefited in terms of neighborhood pride and enhancement and increased collaboration among municipal departments.

There are many reasons from a planner's perspective that neighborhood schools are better for students: the potential for pedestrian and bicycle access; the promotion of local safety and security; tighter community connections; and the encouragement of strong parental involvement. These benefits also can accrue to other members of the community, especially older adults who could use the building for meals or recreations. They could also assist with instruction and other school activities (Schools for Successful Communities: An Element of Smart Growth 2004).

Child care and care for older adults can be co-located. In Ithaca, New York, a local Head Start program is permanently housed at a retirement community. Each week, the older adults work with pre-schoolers on a variety of activities such as reading, singing, and crafts. The intergenerational program (which includes bowling and a choir) allows older people to participate in the mentorship of young community members. Studies of such structured interaction between young children and older adults show children become more helpful, empathize with older people, and develop better self-control as a result (Femia et al. 2008).

Access to fresh food is also a concern. In New York City, the school department teamed with the Department of Aging to transport older New Yorkers from senior centers to supermarkets as well as museums, parks, and other public places. The program uses school buses when they are not transporting children. For older adults, the trips are free. The multi-generational bus strategy took planning and coordination between two New York City bureaucracies. It also took vision to realize that the two departments with distinct missions and target populations had a shared problem. By tackling that problem together, they found a way to make more efficient use of a large investment – the buses. Such a strategy would be even more valuable in many suburban and rural places where public transit is poor. Rural Chenango County, New York combined funds for paratransit services for older adults and those with disabilities, medicaid transit, and meals

on wheels transit to form the core of a broader public transit system that serves users of all ages (Ray 1993).

## Conclusion

Dowell Myers (2007) talks about the need for an intergenerational social contract. The new pressures of an aging society require that we recognize the shared economic and community issues faced by different generations and across different ethnicities. In this brief, we have discussed ways that such a mindset has started to germinate.

Still, the change will be no easy task. There are deep divides based upon inaccurate cultural stereotypes, economic inequities, and fear. Mistaken positions lead to selfish and short sighted decision making. Our nation cannot afford to remain so narrowly focused. Our communities can take the lead by building new conversations, coalitions, and shared strategies that link generations and build more sustainable communities.

Planners must be at the forefront of overcoming these challenges and educating residents about the benefits of broader thinking. Comprehensive planning must be expanded to encompass multiple generations and identify those issues that can bring the interests of the generations together. Strategies, such as those that emphasize the design of safe, walkable communities; the convenient location (and co-location) of adequate and quality child care and senior services; and universal accessibility in building codes, are important steps. However, real progress will come when the attitudes of planners, political leaders, and the general public shift to the realization that communities are more sustainable if generations work together.



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## Toolkit

- 2020 Community Plan on Aging - [www.jabacares.org/page/full/2020-plan/](http://www.jabacares.org/page/full/2020-plan/)
- APA Policy Guide on Housing - <http://www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/housing.htm>
- APA Policy Guide on Smart Growth - <http://www.planning.org/conference/previous/2009/coverage/worldkeynote.htm>
- Center for Universal Design at NC State University - [http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/about\\_ud/about\\_ud.htm](http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/about_ud/about_ud.htm)
- Hope Meadows intergenerational neighborhood - <http://www.generationsofhope.org/>
- Intergenerational Programs and Aging, Penn State Agriculture and Extension Education - [intergenerational.cas.psu.edu](http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu)
- Kiddo, Kids in Downtown Denver Organized has a Facebook page at: <http://zh-hk.facebook.com/pages/Kids-in-Downtown-Denver-Organized/362320531736>
- Linking economic development and child care project at Cornell University - <http://economicdevelopmentandchildcare.org>
- Generations United - [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org)
- National Complete Streets Coalition - [www.completestreets.org](http://www.completestreets.org)
- Reaching Out: Youth and Family Participation, Cornell University, Kevin McAvey - [http://economicdevelopmentandchildcare.org/documents/technical\\_assistance/planning\\_family\\_friendly/issue\\_participation.pdf](http://economicdevelopmentandchildcare.org/documents/technical_assistance/planning_family_friendly/issue_participation.pdf)

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